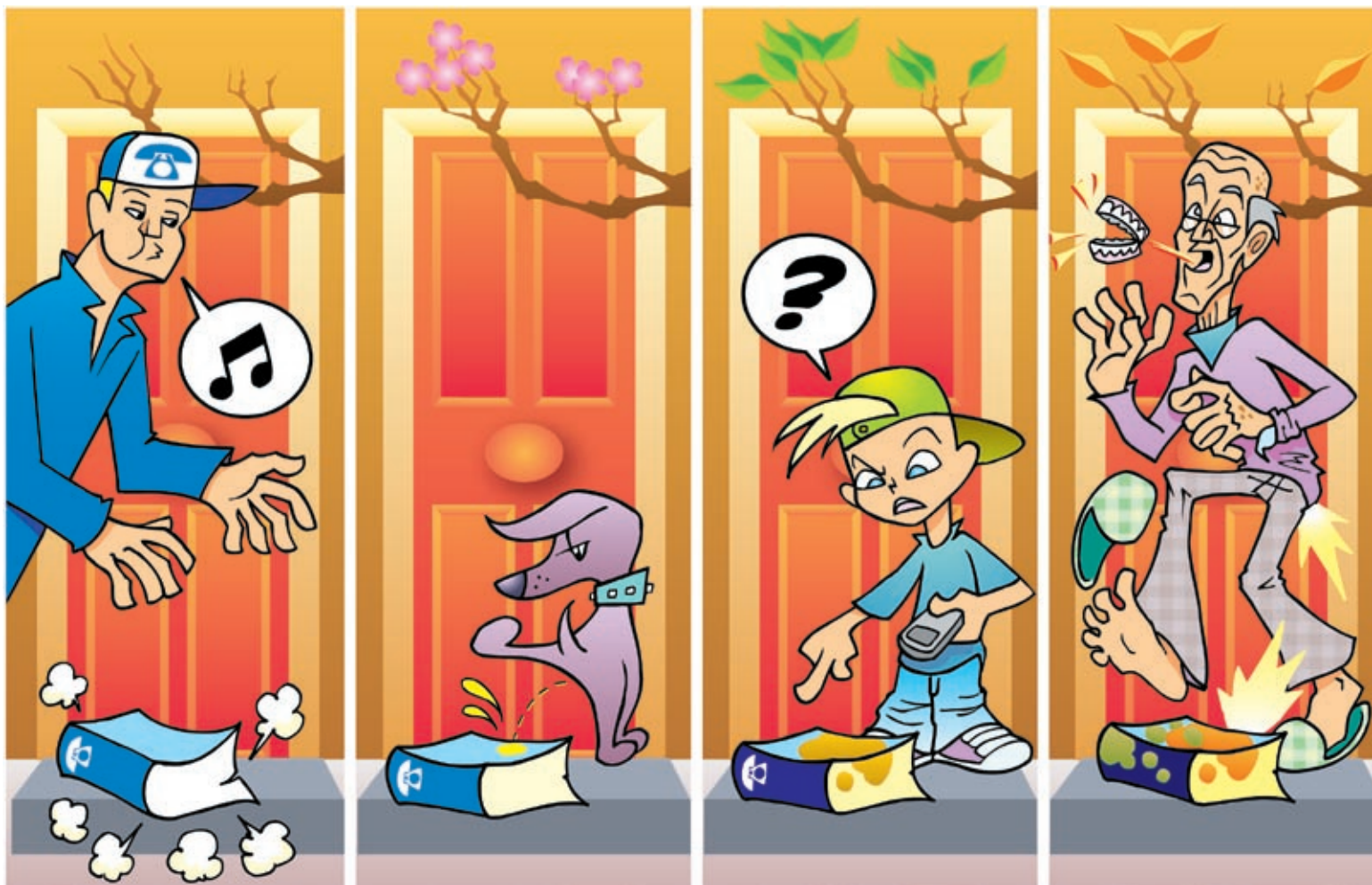




RANTS & RAVES

Mel Croucher unleashes his venom on the humble phone book, while Simon Edwards documents his love/hate relationship with the internet and comes up with the perfect way to prevent theft: stop buying things

OFF THE HOOK

Mel Croucher

RANTS

Last Tuesday, a white truck kerb-crawled down my street disgorging beautifully packaged reference books. It was a ritual delivery to the doorsteps of every dwelling and every business here in my corner of the country. Each of these brand-new publications came in twin-bound volumes, crammed full of expert guidance, dedicated help and useful information. But the vast majority of them festered right there on the doorstep, forlorn and unloved. Dogs peed on them, kids kicked them around, blind war veterans tripped over them and broke their hips,

because nobody wanted to give them shelf space, even though they were free. And then on Friday, the binmen

Phone book users should be paying extra for their ridiculous antique books, and I should be getting a reduction on my phone bill for using the web

hauled all the unwanted reference books away to a landfill site. They had to be dumped because they were full of a mysterious dye that makes it illegal to recycle them.

The same wasteful, time-consuming thing is happening all over the country. It happens once a year, it costs tens of millions of

pounds, and I want it stopped. In every sense of the phrase, I am talking telephone numbers here.

THROW THE BOOK AT THEM

I haven't needed to open a telephone directory so far this century. Honestly, I really haven't. So why should I pay through the nose for these useless books, in the form of hidden charges levied by BT or whoever the hell runs things these days? I already know the phone numbers of everyone I need to

call. They are all programmed into my mobile phone, my landline and the phone/fax utility on my PC. If I am in need of an enema, an undertaker or a pizza, I log on to www.bt.com, www.192.com or any of the other free online directories and find one in seconds. The idea of paying premium rates to call directory enquiries is ludicrous, as I can get the information I want for free. And if I need to reverse the operation and find the identity of a mystery caller, I type their number into my browser to see what manner of charlatan or lunatic has tried to contact me.

France Télécom had the right idea years ago, when it gave terminals to millions of customers, providing them with instant directories and interactive databases that were continually updated for free. The system worked brilliantly for years until it was swamped by subscribers searching for traditional Gallic listings such as tuggery, druggery and buggery.

I have enormous sympathy for any technophobes out there who insist on raping the planet's resources so they can fumble their way through reams of phone books, searching for data that is out of date before the ink dries. If you don't want to take advantage of online communications,



be my guest. But why should I subsidise you? You should pay extra for your ridiculous antique books, and I should get a reduction on my phone bill for using the web. Hello?

THE INTERNET IS GREAT

Simon Edwards **RAVES**

The internet is the largest, most powerful network in the world. It links a vast variety of computers, from tiny handheld PDAs to unimaginably fast supercomputers. A piece of data can traverse the globe in milliseconds. Many billions of pounds have been spent setting up the infrastructure that connects organisations, businesses and individuals in an unprecedented way.

Information is widely available, censorship exists but is hard to enforce and speech has never been freer. Governments have set up shady forces of hackers to do battle online. You can view live broadcasts of war zones or real-time space missions. You can get the news when it really is new.

But more importantly, you can easily find places in your area that

have rude names. This is what the internet is really for. We, the public, don't need to know about the political situation in Somewhereistan. We want to know that just 10 miles away is a place called Nasty, or that Panty Hill is on our doorstep. The website at <http://places.jump-around.com> has all the information you need to locate places with names that only juveniles would find amusing. Enter your postcode or browse the list of places that includes names such as Ring Burn, Thong and Twatt.

THE INTERNET IS RUBBISH

Simon Edwards **RANTS**

Aside from amusing diversions, the internet has become a very useful tool for consumers. It can provide completely up-to-date information, including cut-throat prices.

Companies now acknowledge that many households are out at work all day. They allow you to specify alternative addresses for deliveries, so you can have your CDs, digital cameras and printers delivered to work or a trusted neighbour's house.

This sensible business practice makes buying from the internet more convenient than driving to the shops. It all sounds rosy but, as we will see, where there are sweet roses you'll often find some pretty smelly poo.

In *Rants & Raves*, *Shopper* August 2005 you might have read about my computer backup system, or lack thereof. Following a data loss disaster I promised to implement one, and this month I tried. I was thwarted not by a lack of motivation or technical savvy but by a series of events that I can only describe as verging on conspiracy.

LaCie makes a capacious external hard drive called the LaCie Bigger Disk. The 1TB version can hold somewhere between 930GB and 1,024GB of data, depending on how you calculate it. Either way, it's a lot of data and this drive would make an ideal backup disk for my server, desktop PC, laptop and numerous lab computers.

I ordered the drive from LaCie, having downloaded a form, filled it in and faxed it back to authorise the delivery to an alternative address. This isn't exactly 21st century internet business, but it's understandable as a basic anti-fraud system. A couple of days later the company contacted me to say that my business credit card had been declined and the order cancelled. A quick call to my bank in India resulted in a conversation that went something like this:

Me: *Why was the card declined?*

Bored-sounding man: *Sometimes we put a random block on cards as an anti-fraud measure. I've taken it off now.*

Me: *Is there any way I can prevent you declining my card for no good reason in the future?*

Bored-sounding man: *You could always phone us before buying something.*

Me: *What, every time?*

Very-bored-sounding man: *Sorry. It's an anti-fraud measure.*

This anti-fraud measure is certainly effective in that, while customers won't be able to buy anything, neither will a criminal. Let's go one step further. I urge you all to melt your credit cards and burn any paper cash you have on your person. Throw loose change down the nearest drain. That will give those filthy fraudsters a run for their money.

ADDRESSING DOWN

I found the hard disk available for £70 less at another online shop. I didn't notice that the company delivers only to the cardholder's address until it was too late. It's an anti-fraud measure, you see. Delivering solely to the cardholder's address reduces the opportunities for fraudsters, but it also makes it impossible for many customers to receive their goods.

Here's my advice. Never buy anything at all. That way, any orders a company receives are clearly fraudulent and can be ignored. Plus, burglars will find robbing houses unprofitable because no-one will own anything. In your face, fraudsters and burglars.

My hard disk ended up in a courier's depot, 35 miles down the M25. I would have to undertake the journey to retrieve it on Saturday at 10am to make the midday deadline. Realising this on Saturday at 11am didn't make my plans for a weekend backup session very likely, although it did clear my afternoon for a session of smashing my head relentlessly against a pebble-dashed wall.

The clock was now ticking. I had five days to pick up the drive or the order would be cancelled. My next opportunity was the following Saturday but I had unalterable plans. It's my fault for having a life. I really should be more considerate to my supplier. The drive returned to the shop and my files remained in jeopardy.

To sandblast salt into the wounds, the following morning my laptop's hard disk appeared to fail completely. This is the one computer in the world that I trust, largely because I haven't sullied it with impulsive upgrades. Of course, it has never been backed up in its life. A quick fiddle with the hard

disk's cable brought it back to life, but the tension in the air was palpable.

At this point I was tempted to despair, get a grip, despair again and then head off to the pub. But no, I promised you that I'd back up, and back up I would. I had downloaded a copy of a disk utility called Acronis True Image (www.acronis.com) just a few days earlier and decided to give it a go.

This software, which costs about \$50 (around £28), creates an image of a hard disk, apparently in the same way as favourites such as Norton Ghost and Partition Magic. But I discovered that True Image is much more flexible.

DIVIDE AND CONQUER

Not only will the boot CD recognise folders shared on the network, it will also record files to CD, DVD, USB and FireWire drives. If you've tried doing this sort of thing using Partition Magic and DOS boot disks, you're a better man than me. The icing on the cake is that it can also create incremental backups of an image, so you can create what are essentially restore points on your data without wasting lots of disk space.

You can also back up a Windows partition while working within Windows, which is useful. This software has enabled me to make temporary arrangements while I attempt to buy a 1TB drive. At the moment a 256GB Maxtor external FireWire drive I had lying around is doing the business for the most important files and Windows installations.

True Image's incremental backup system makes this possible, and without it the disk would buckle under the weight of multiple full disk images. When, by some miracle, I get hold of a 1TB hard disk, the new arrival should be able to hold loads of backups rather than the few I had planned for it.

In the end the anti-fraud efforts of my bank and suppliers ensured that, while I was entirely foiled in my attempts to buy something over the internet, at least their money was safe. That gives me a warm feeling and I happily relinquish my time and hard-earned savings so that these businesses can charge me for their services while making my life as inconvenient as possible. **CS**

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